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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 005221

LONDON FOR TUELLER
PARIS FOR ALLEGRONE

E.O.12356: DECL: 11/30/15
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: SAUDI ARABIA: WHAT IF THE KING REMAINS
INCAPACITATED?

REF: (A) RIYADH 5218; (B) RIYADH 5219

11. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT. CLASSIFIED BY DCM
THEODORE KATTOUF - 1.5 B,D.

12. (C) THE CURRENT MEDICAL PROGNOSIS FOR KING FAHD, ALBEIT INCOMPLETE AND TENTATIVE, SUGGESTS THE POSSIBILITY OF MEDIUM-TERM OR EVEN PROLONGED RECOVERY FROM WHAT IS DESCRIBED DEFINITELY BY OUR MEDICAL SOURCES AS A STROKE. AT THIS STAGE, WITHIN HOURS OF FAHD ENTERING THE HOSPITAL, THE KING'S CONDITION DOES NOT REPEAT NOT APPEAR IMMEDIATELY LIFE-THREATENING (ALTHOUGH IT COULD LATER MOVE IN THAT DIRECTION). INDEED, OUR RMO ALSO NOTES THAT RAPID AND FULL RECOVERY, EVEN WITHIN A DAY OR TWO, IS ALSO ENTIRELY POSSIBLE. THE KING'S PERSONAL SECRETARY STRONGLY IMPLIED IN A CALL TO THE AMBASSADOR THAT SUCH AN UPBEAT PROGNOSIS IS WARRANTED (SEE REF B).

13. (C) ASSUMING, HOWEVER, THAT SOME DEGREE OF INCAPACITATION PERSISTS, PERHAPS OVER A PERIOD OF WEEKS, THE ISSUE OF ITS IMPACT ON DECISION-MAKING AND ON INTERNAL DYNAMICS WITHIN THE AL SAUD MUST BE FACED.

14. (C) ASSUMING THAT FAHD DOES NOT SHOW IMMEDIATE SIGNS OF FULL RECOVERY WITHIN THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS, THE COUNCIL OF ELDERS, CONSISTING OF THE MEMBERS OF THE AL SAUD AND MOSTLY OF THE SENIOR SURVIVING SONS OF ABDUL AZIZ, WILL LIKELY GATHER INFORMALLY AND QUIETLY TO ASSESS THE KING'S CONDITION. THEY WILL BE MOTIVATED TO PROJECT AN AURA OF STABILITY, CONTINUITY, FAMILY UNITY, AND CONTINUED LOYALTY TO KING FAHD. ALMOST CERTAINLY, THE IMMEDIATE CONSENSUS WILL BE THAT CROWN PRINCE ABDULLAH SHOULD BE ASKED TO ACT IN THE NAME OF THE KING. SENIOR ULEMA, THE OTHER PILLAR OF THE SAUDI REGIME, ARE LIKELY TO TACITLY AGREE. THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS, COMPOSED PARTLY OF NONROYALS, WILL NOT PLAY A ROLE IN ANY DECISION THAT IS REACHED.

15. (C) OUTSIDE THE FAMILY CONSULTATIONS, THE SAG IS LIKELY TO KEEP MEDIA REPORTS AND SPECULATION ABOUT THE KING'S HEALTH TO A MINIMUM. POSITIVE BULLETINS ARE LIKELY TO BE STANDARD FARE. WE CAN ALSO EXPECT EVEN MORE STEPPED-UP SECURITY PRECAUTIONS AT PUBLIC BUILDINGS AND IN THE COUNTRY GENERALLY, IN A BID TO MINIMIZE CHANCES OF A SECOND TERRORIST ATTACK OR OTHER POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN A PERIOD OF UNCERTAINTY.

16. (C) OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS AND WEEKS, ASSUMING

FAHD'S CONDITION REMAINS STABLE, ABDULLAH IS UNLIKELY TO BE DESIGNATED AS REGENT, IF ONLY BECAUSE THE ONLY PRECEDENT FOR THE NEW SITUATION IS THE FAMILY'S DECISION TO TRANSFER KING SAUD'S POWERS TO CP FAYSAL AS REGENT IN 1964. THE CRUCIAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO SITUATIONS IS THAT SAUD WAS REMOVED BECAUSE OF INCOMPETENCE AND NOT FOR REASONS OF PHYSICAL INCAPACITY. CROWN PRINCE ABDULLAH REGULARLY CHAIRS THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS AND HAS LONG BEEN PROJECTED TO THE NATION, AND TREATED, AS THE CLEARLY ESTABLISHED NO. TWO BEHIND THE KING. WE HAVE NO REASON TO BELIEVE THAT HE WOULD NOT EFFECTIVELY STEP FORWARD, WITH FULL FAMILY BACKING, AT THIS TIME.

17. (C) ADDING TO THE INNATE CONSERVATISM OF THE AL SAUD AND THE FAMILY'S LONG TRADITION OF MAINTAINING COHESION AND SOLIDARITY WILL BE CONCERN WITH THE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT FOLLOWING THE NOVEMBER 13 OMBING ATTACK ON OPM/SANG. BECAUSE THIS HAS BEEN WIDELY VIEWED AS AN ATTACK ON THE REGIME AS MUCH AS ON THE U.S., THE SENIOR PRINCES WILL BE FURTHER ENCOURAGED TO AVOID ANY APPEARANCE OF DISUNITY BY DEVIATING FROM THE ESTABLISHED LINE OF AUTHORITY OR SUCCESSION.

18. (C) IN SUM, IN THE SHORT TERM (DEFINED AS OVER THE NEXT 30 OR SO DAYS), WE ANTICIPATE A SMOOTH AND PEACEFUL EMPHASIS ON MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO. DECISION-MAKING, NEVER A RAPID PROCESS IN SAUDI ARABIA, MAY SLOW DOWN CONSIDERABLY, ESPECIALLY AS ABDULLAH WILL CAREFULLY AVOID ANY SIGN OF PRESUMING FAHD'S PERMANENT REMOVAL FROM OFFICE OR BY INAPPROPRIATELY ACTING AS IF HE WERE KING.

19. (C) LOOKING AHEAD FURTHER THAN A MONTH, THE KING'S ACTUAL MEDICAL CONDITION WILL DETERMINE WHAT DECISIONS THE COUNCIL OF ELDERS WILL TAKE. A PROGNOSIS OF A SLOW BUT SURE RECOVERY OF FAHD'S FACULTIES WILL UNDOUBTEDLY LEAD THE ELDERS TO CONCUR IN THE NEW STATUS QUO. A PROGNOSIS OF PROLONGED OR PERMANENT INCAPACITATION WOULD FORCE THE COUNCIL, I.E. THE AL SAUD, TO THEN ADDRESS THE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE OF ACTUAL SUCCESSION. AT THIS JUNCTURE, WE HAVE LITTLE DOUBT THAT THE PRIME OBJECTIVE AGAIN WILL BE TO PROJECT AN IMAGE OF CONTROL, STABILITY, AND CONTINUITY.

110. (C) SHOULD FAHD'S MEDICAL CONDITION DETERIORATE AND HE DIE, THE INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISM OUTLINED ABOVE WOULD ALSO COME INTO PLAY. UNDER SUCH CIRCUMSTANCES, THE ROLE OF THE ULEMA MIGHT BE MORE VISIBLY ENHANCED AS THE NEW KING - CP ABDULLAH RAISED TO THE THRONE - WOULD REQUIRE THEIR FORMAL SANCTION. IN A SENSE, THE KING'S DEATH, WHILE PRECIPITATING COMPLEX SCENARIOS OF POWER TRANSFER TO CP ABDULLAH AND SPECULATION ABOUT WHO WILL FOLLOW ABDULLAH, WOULD BE SIMPLER, IF ONLY BECAUSE THE CURRENT LINE OF SUCCESSION IS SO WELL ESTABLISHED. WE SEE LITTLE CHANCE THAT THE CP COULD OR WOULD BE PUSHED ASIDE; NOR, IN FACT, DO WE BELIEVE THAT MINDEF SULTAN, CURRENTLY THIRD IN LINE TO THE THRONE, WOULD MAKE SUCH A PLAY. EVEN LESS LIKELY WOULD BE AN ATTEMPT BY ANOTHER PRINCE - WHETHER ANOTHER SON OF ABDUL AZIZ OR A GRANDSON - TO SECURE POWER.

MABUS